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NEWS RELEASES

Media Invited to Observe Thermal Protection Tests for Aerocapture -- NASA Technology to Propel Spacecraft of Future -- at Expo Sept. 6

08.23.06

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Sandia National Laboratories, Albuquerque, N.M.
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Media advisory: 06-098



What: Two towers, 212 mirrors and new technology for space travel will take center stage at live tests that will give news media a first-hand look at cost-saving NASA technology. The In-Space Propulsion Technology Project at NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville, Ala. and Sandia National Laboratories in Albuquerque, N. M., are conducting the event, allowing media to view testing of new advanced thermal protection systems for aerocapture flight maneuvers. Aerocapture is a near-propellantless maneuver that uses a planet's atmosphere to capture a spacecraft and place it in its desired orbit.

The nine-acre test facility at Sandia consists of a 200-foot tall solar tower, 212 computer-controlled mirrors called heliostats, and a separate five-story control tower. The solar tower uses the mirrors to track the sun and focus sunlight on a target, simulating the high heat encountered during an aerocapture maneuver. Media will be able to view tests from both towers.

The tests are a critical milestone in the development of a unique propulsion technology that could help power missions to Mars, Venus and Titan, along with the outer planets. Media will be able to view test hardware and interview NASA managers, along with independent investigators from research facilities across the country.

Who: On hand for interviews will be:

- Bonnie James, technology manager of aerocapture propulsion at Marshall
- Michelle Munk, lead systems engineer for aerocapture technology at Marshall
- Also on hand will be technology developers from partnering institutions. These principal investigators will demonstrate and answer questions about new spacecraft shell configurations, inflatable heat shields, inflatable deceleration systems, advanced thermal protection systems, and other new technologies. A list of investigators can be found on the Web at <http://www.inspacepropulsion.com/expo/bios.html>.

When: Wednesday, Sept. 6
11:30 -2 p.m. MDT

Where: The Sandia National Labs National Solar Thermal Test Facility on Kirkland Air Force Base in Albuquerque

To attend: News media interested in covering the event should contact Stephanie Holinka of the Sandia Media Relations Office at 505-284-9227 no later than Thursday, Aug. 31 for security processing and directions to Kirkland's designated gate, where parking is available. Media must report to the gate by 11:30 a.m. MDT and will be driven to the test facility.

For supporting materials for this news release -- such as photographs, fact sheets, video and audio files and more -- please visit the NASA Marshall Center Newsroom Web site at:

<http://www.nasa.gov/centers/marshall/news>

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